Acts: World-Changers
Acts 17: 1-9

As we resume our journey through Acts, we find ourselves in chapter 17:1-9. Please stand and let us read the Word of God together.

Paul and Silas, along with Timothy and Luke, have just left the city of Philippi in the region of Macedonia, so let’s see where the Holy Spirit leads them to next. Beginning in vs. 1 we read, “Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue for the Jews.” (use map https://openoureyeslord.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/map.png).

As you can see from the map, Paul and his team are heading south from Philippi. They travel through both Amphipolis and Apollonia before arriving in Thessalonica. If they travelled straight through from Philippi to Thessalonica on horses, the trip would take about three days. If they were travelling by foot, it would take closer to a week because of the very rugged terrain they had to cover. They would have been using the ancient road called the Via Egnatia which hugged the eastern coast of Macedonia before turning westward toward Thessalonica.

As was the case with Philippi, Thessalonica was also a leading city in Macedonia. The historian Strabo called Thessalonica “the metropolis of Macedonia” and the poet Antipater called the city “the mother of all Macedonia.” It had a major harbor and was a key link to the Bosporus Strait and the Black Sea which made it ideal for commerce. Historians estimate that the population would have ranged anywhere from 20,000-100,000 citizens. Thessalonica was classified as a “free city” within the Roman Empire, so it had the right to self-government based upon the ancient Greek model. Thessalonica was the capital city of the second district of Macedonia and also served as the capital of the whole region and home of the proconsul. As a senatorial province, the city was very loyal to Rome…which provides the context for what happens when Paul and Silas begin their work of preaching the gospel (Bock, Acts p.549-550).

Let’s see what happens next beginning with vs. 2: “And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’”

Paul engages the Jews and God-fearing Greeks with the gospel by teaching in the synagogue on three different Sabbath days. The three words Luke uses to describe Paul’s methodology for presenting the Gospel are worth a closer look.
First, Luke writes that Paul “reasoned” with them. The Greek term used by Luke comes from the verb “dialegomai” from which we get our English word, “dialogue.” So Paul creates a dialogue around the Scriptures by which he leads people to discover the scriptural context of the Gospel…does that sound familiar? Paul is literally employing what we often refer to as the Discovery Bible Study methodology. He is engaging people in a conversation about the Scriptures in hopes of leading them to discover who God is, who we are, and what God has done to save us from our sin.

Luke also writes that Paul was “explaining.” The Greek verb here is “dianoigo” which literally means “to open.” Paul is “opening” the scriptures in such a way that his listeners can begin to connect the dots and discover the truth of God’s self-revelation. Do you remember who else opened the scriptures to His listeners? Jesus “opened the scriptures” to the two travelers on the road to Emmaus following His resurrection, right? Remember Luke 24:31-32:

And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to one another, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?”

How did Jesus “open the Scriptures” to the travelers on the road to Emmaus? Luke 24:27, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

The work of “opening” the scriptures is most specifically the task of showing people how all of the Scriptures point to Jesus. In many respects, my job as your Pastor is to “open” the scriptures in such a way that you see Jesus in every verse of God’s Word, and that you come to understand that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life…He is the Promise and the Fulfillment of every promise God ever made to His people in the scriptures. This is what Paul is now doing in the Thessalonian synagogue…Luke literally writes that Paul was “explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead…”

Note lastly that Paul was “proving” as well as creating dialogue around and opening the scriptures. The Greek verb utilized here is “paratitheimi” which literally means “to place before.” This is where we get the phrase, “to lay out the evidence” or to “make your case.” The verb refers to the assembly and presentation of information consisting of evidence, logic, and reason to lead a jury to render the correct and unmistakable verdict.

In our scientific age, we like to think of “proof” as consisting only of those experiments that we can see replicated before our very eyes. Such is why the atheist proudly states, “You cannot prove that God exists.” But consider what the word “prove” has always meant historically. To prove something was to “place before” the listeners the evidence, the logic, and the
reasonableness of your argument. Whenever we are talking about history, “proving” that something actually happened in the past requires eyewitness accounts, documents, and so on along with logical arguments and a reasonable narrative for why it makes sense that such events did actually take place given the context and all the possible alternatives.

This is what Paul has been doing now for three weeks in the local synagogue. He has been leading his listeners to consider the evidence in Scriptures; he has been opening the scriptures in a way that leads to this logical conclusion: clearly the Messiah had to suffer, die, and the be resurrected the dead. He is placing before them the case that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah based upon the eyewitness accounts that Jesus suffered and rose again on the third day, just as the Scriptures foretold.

If you are interested in what Scriptures Paul would have been referring to, I would point you to Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 which clearly reveal that the Messiah will suffer and be killed, and Psalm 16:10 which reveals that the Chosen One of God will not go to the place of the dead, and His body “will not undergo decay.”

So…how did it go? Was Paul successful in making his case for Christ? Let’s pick up the story in vs. 4: “And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”

Not unlike other cities, Paul’s greatest harvest comes from those other than the Jews…which is a bit ironic given that he is making his argument from the Jewish scriptures. Luke reports that many God-fearing Greeks become believers over the course of many weeks, and several women of influence as well.

However, once again, even as the Gospel spreads and Paul’s team celebrates the powerful work of the Holy Spirit who is bringing conviction among many people…there is a storm brewing. Look at vs. 5:

But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

I hate to say it, but if you have been with us throughout our journey in Luke and now the book of Acts, this response from the Jewish leadership is almost getting predictable. Notice…it’s not all the Jews who resist the Gospel and seek to persecute the Christians…it’s those Jews that Luke describes as “jealous.” That word sounds petty, and I think it’s probably misleading. The angry Jews are not “jealous” of the Christians in regards to their popularity or good looks. A better word would be “zealous.” The zealous Jews are offended because they perceive Paul to be a heretic and a false teacher. They reject the notion that the long-awaited Messiah could ever be a
poor carpenter from Nazareth who suffers crucifixion on a Roman cross. Remember, Paul writes in 1 Cor. 1:23 that the cross was a stumbling block for the Jew. The cross was an object of shame associated with criminals and the invading Roman occupiers. Such is why Paul has been making his case that the Messiah had to suffer, die, and be resurrected according to the Scriptures. If you don’t understand that it had to be that way…if you don’t accept that the Scriptures make that clear…than I think we can all imagine how difficult it would be for the Jews to accept that the Jesus who died on a Roman cross was the Messiah whose “Kingdom would never end.” Now…I say all of that because there is no room in the Christian worldview for “anti-Semitism.” Paul, like Jesus, loved the Jews…they were his people, and his passion for them is so clearly stated in Romans 9:2-5

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

Please do not let these persecution stories in Acts turn your heart against the Jews. Many of us who are the most zealous about our faith now would have likely behaved in the same way if we happened to have lived in the first century Jewish context. We owe a tremendous debt of respect and honor to the Jews; and like Paul, we should consider them our spiritual kinsmen. Those of us who are Gentiles…which is pretty much everyone here, should recognize that we have been grafted into the People of God through Christ…we have been adopted into the family. But remember that the original family was that group of people that God called by His own name—the Israelites—the Jews—the Chosen People of God’s self-revelation. Let us not become disrespectful of that fact, even as we pray and petition the Lord that all of Israel will be saved through the blood of Christ. Amen?

Now…having said all of that…what happens here in Thessalonica at the instigation of jealous Jews gets pretty out of hand. Luke reports that these Jewish leaders go into the marketplace and gather up “wicked men of the rabble.” Who are the rabble? The literal translation here is “wicked men of the marketplace,” and the cultural assumption is that these are loafers, scammers, and people of ill-intent who haunt the marketplace looking for an easy score. It’s not stated, but I suspect this rabble-rousing group could have been purchased by the angry Jews, almost like paid mercenaries. The purpose of this gathering is clear: form a mob, and then do what mobs do in the ancient world…beat and kill whoever is the identified troublemaker. So, incited by the jealous Jews, the mob storms the house of Jason, who a local man who is apparently serving as the local host for Paul and his team.

However, when the mob gets to Jason’s house, they discover that Paul and Silas are not there! It’s kind of funny…I can almost imagine them ringing the doorbell and getting an automated
message, “We’re sorry. The people you came to torture and kill are not home at the moment. If you would like to leave a message…”

So, in place of their intended victims, the angry mob grabs hold of a citizen from Thessalonica…Jason, and some local “brothers”…who are believers…and they bring them before the city authorities. Now look at vs. 6 and let’s consider the charges made against the Christians. “…they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.’”

Don’t you love it? Say what you will about the early Christians…they certainly did make an impact, right? I find it fascinating that the accusers are actually acknowledging what was now becoming common knowledge in the ancient world: The Christians are turning the world upside down! These Jesus-followers are WORLD CHANGERS! Their accusation is meant to be an insult, but it actually turns into a compliment.

Are the Jesus-followers that disruptive? Are they actually turning the world upside down? Or are they living right side up through the power of the Holy Spirit, which reveals that the rest of the world has become quite accustomed to living upside down? Getting dizzy?

Listen: ever since the fall, all of humanity has been living upside down. Instead of worshipping God as God, we make gods from our own hands, fashioned in our own image, or we try to pretend there is no god so that we can do whatever we want…that’s upside down. Ever since the fall we have given temporal things eternal value and we have made eternal things a once-a-week duty if we have the time and feel so inclined to go to church. That’s upside down. Ever since the fall, we have spent trillions upon trillions of dollars developing weapons of mass destruction while untold millions of children die of disease and starvation…that’s upside down.

Here’s another thing that’s upside down: the way we define what is right and wrong. We now determine ethics, morality, and decency based upon popular vote or the YouTube video that gets the most hits. If the majority of our culture agrees that abortion is ok, than it must be OK, right? If the majority of our country, or at least the ruling party, says that same-sex marriage is ok, it must be OK, right? If the media insists that choosing your own gender is ok, it must be OK, right? What happens when that popular opinion poll concludes that the manipulating the DNA of an embryo to get the traits that we wish for out of our unborn children is OK? Or that killing off the old people to make room for the young people is OK? Who will say they are wrong, and by what authority? Does it make sense to establish our moral and ethical boundaries based upon popular sentiment or the commands of God? Which of those two choices is upside down in your opinion?
Church: I know you are concerned about the persecution, ridicule, and exclusion that might come about if we as Jesus-followers risk upsetting the status quo of our culture. But I beg you, be far more concerned about what will happen if we don’t.

People who fly planes can tell you: if you fly that plane upside down for too long…you lose your bearings…it becomes impossible to know where you are or which way is up. Our culture has been flying upside down for far too long…we have lost our way…and it’s not going to get better by itself. Church: Be a leader…be different…be an authentic follower of Jesus who is willing to stick out and live in a counter-cultural way.

According to the witness of the New Testament, Jesus followers are World Changers…that’s what we do. We march to the beat of a different Drummer. His name is Jesus, and He is, in fact, our KING! This claim got the early Christians into all kinds of trouble as we have seen, but it’s true: Jesus is King…not our president, and not any other leader be it our boss or our professors in college. Because Jesus is our King, we will bow to no other king, we will bow to no other opinion poll, we will bow to no other cultural norms. That doesn’t mean that we despise or disrespect our authorities of the state…not at all. It doesn’t mean that we withdraw from the culture to form our own commune…not at all. But listen: we cannot afford to blend into the culture and fly our planes upside down so as to avoid persecution and ridicule. The world needs to be reminded that there is One who has authority over the heavens and the earth, and His name is Jesus. He is our Compass…He determines where true north is…not popular culture. The world needs to see what following that King looks like in real life situations.

But know this: revealing the folly of this world will never be popular, and it will always be costly. We’ve seen this tendency with Paul and Silas in Philippi, and now again we see Jason and his friends in harm’s way in Thessalonica. Fortunately for them, they are spared this time around. Look at how our story ends in vss. 8-9: And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

We’re basically left to conclude that Jason and his friends made a deal and then made a deposit to secure the deal. As we’ll see later in chapter 17, they likely made a promise to send Paul and Silas on their way, and that’s exactly what will happen when we get into the text next week.

So…what can we take away from this story this morning?

1) The work of the Christian is to lead people to discover the truth of God in the scriptures; to open the scriptures so people can see how they all point to Jesus, and to set forth the evidence that Jesus Christ is Lord…He is our One True King. That’s not just the preacher’s job…that’s the work we can all do, beginning with hosting a Discovery Bible Study in our homes, schools,
or workplaces. We can all lead people to discover what is true about Jesus. When the Kingship of Jesus takes root in the hearts of people, that’s when true transformation begins, and that’s our goal: to see more and more people come under the Lordship of Christ.

2) Expect that God has placed people in your path who are spiritually open …so we must be bold in making the Case for Christ. Remember our BLESS rhythms. Begin with prayer, listen and engage, eat together, serve, and share your story. That’s the best way to be a faithful witness in the place God has planted you.

3) The witness, message, and lifestyle of Christians SHOULD look a bit upside down to our prevailing culture. Our lifestyles and choices should cause people to scratch their heads and wonder because we submit to the authority of Christ and not the popular vote.

4) Like Jason and his friends, the people we influence for Christ need to be prepared for the spiritual and social resistance that will likely come knocking due to their Christian lifestyle and convictions. Please do not fail to instruct your children or those you “raise” in the faith regarding this reality. For far too long Christianity has been presented simply as the medicine that heals and the food that nourishes…and that is true, we find both healing and nourishment in Christ. But don’t leave out the hard stuff…tell the truth…the road to life is narrow and hard according to Christ…it’s not easy. Following Jesus into hard places is part of the deal. Following Jesus into racial reconciliation, policy change, economic development for impoverished people groups, liberation of those enslaved in human trafficking, provision for children stuck in the foster care system, holding to a God-honoring business ethic when millions of dollars are on the line, defending a biblical worldview as a viable option in our educational curriculum…it ain’t easy…it’s hard, and the whole world will think you are flying upside down when you follow Jesus into those places and do what He commands.

If you influence next generation Christians, tell them the truth so that they are prepared, so that we might raise up a generation of courageous World Changers who will endure to the end, no matter the cost. It begins the minute you walk out this door. Be bold and courageous, take your stand, honor your King.

Let’s pray.